

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

LOVING OUR NEIGHBOR

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

Lev. 19:1 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 2 Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy . . . 15 You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. 16 You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD. 17 You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall not reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. 18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

[Note: The analysis assumes a readership of Christ-trusters: that Jesus was crucified and raised from among the dead, in order that we in our totality would be crucified with him and that, by faith, we also might be raised from death with him. The analysis also assumes that the Diagnosis and Prognosis form an indivisible unity which expresses an indivisible moment in our lives.]

DIAGNOSIS: Love! – Even If You Can't

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Loving Our Neighbor – Part I*

Nothing piques our interest and desire more than “love.” We take every opportunity to get more and more of it, in whatever form. It even seems that the more love we give the more love we get in return. No matter how we define it or limit it, love makes life livable. In that sense love, even love that is limited, is good. We cannot live without it, and we will do anything for it. Some of us will even die for it—though in dying of course they don't get it. So to prevent that, we limit it, as in our text (though 19:33-34 extends love to the sojourner). Christ, of course, sets no limit at all to loving others, even to one's enemy. Perhaps, then, the costlier love is for us the better off we are. But this is a fool's game. We forget that loving others as Christ loved us requires our death! Not lastly but firstly. So we limit it; we have no other choice, for love like everything else must be doable. And how grand it is! Though we necessarily limit our love for others, our desire for it ourselves is limitless. We are faced with a paradox: although love (as Christ loves) requires first our death, love (as we necessarily limit it) keeps us alive.

Moreover, loving one another has its natural analogue in loving God. So it seems to us that the more we love one another (limited as that is) the more we demonstrate our love for God, and the more God must love us in return—the ultimate quid pro quo. But if our love could by any means gain God's love for us, Christ would not have had to die. So then, the fact that God demands love, whether limited or not, is entirely beside the point. No amount of loving one another will ever establish a right relationship with God. At least not the kind of relationship that Jesus offers. God utterly refuses to be bought off.

As far as we ourselves have anything to do about it, the “holiness” that was promised by love is nowhere to be found.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *The “Hate” within Us*

The Leviticus text suggests that the root of our paradox, cited above, lies not so deep within us, in our “heart.” Our heart has no “skin in the game” to die. Even if holiness itself is the goal, our heart cannot play the game. Our heart continually seeks to live, not to die. Experience teaches the heart well. On the one hand, no amount of love will stave off our eventual death. On the other hand, all attempts to love one another, while doomed to failure, are met with the repulsive pangs of true death. Such heart-pain is actually good for us, what Paul means by being “crucified with Christ” and Luther by “suffering and the cross.” It reminds us not only of our mortality but of our incurable faithlessness. Therefore our death-defying, “hating” heart simply cannot believe that by dying, true life and righteousness and holiness would be close at hand.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *God’s Alien Work*

The preceding problems become exceedingly problematic when, through spiritual heart-pain suffering, that God himself is at work among us, precisely to put us to death—flesh and heart altogether. There is no escaping the totality of God’s judgment, and no legal loopholes to jump through or invent. But there is a purpose to God’s “alien work” (Luther) of putting us to death, namely, “to make room for faith” (again, Luther). Of course, whether we trust in God or not, God works his wrath upon us. By putting us to death, God prevents us from any further futile attempts to love him (or others) by our own powers. (But seeing God at work in the death and resurrection of Jesus gives us hope that God’s alien work is not for naught.)

PROGNOSIS: Love! – You Are Now Free to Do So

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God's Proper Work*

The Leviticus text promised us “holiness”—like unto the holiness of God. But the command to “love your neighbor as yourself,” however interpreted, does not result in our holiness but rather it increased sinfulness. The promised holiness comes to us only as we are emptied and wholly receptive vessels (or open mouths or empty communion glasses); that is, apart from our loving, our doing, our power, our life. It comes to us as the grace-gift of Christ himself; that is, God's own loving, doing, power, and life. The cross and resurrection of Jesus is God's “proper work” (Luther), giving us unconditionally what we could not possibly give to ourselves: the very life of God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Joy Given from Without*

The Holying Spirit of God is a foretaste of God's promise of holiness. Out of our nothingness, the Spirit creates us entirely anew (or “from above” as John puts it) in Christ so that, like Jesus, we may live before the holy God, by faith, in true righteousness and holiness. For, the Holying Spirit is manifest in us not by our success or talents or anything deemed worthy by the standards of the world but solely by faith in Christ. We live by faith alone; which means by the life and power and doing and loving of Jesus Christ rather than in our own life and power, etc. For us, that really is the end of the matter. And the evidence, so to speak, for our new life in Christ is the heart-joy we feel on hearing the Gospel. Where there is heart-joy, there is true holiness. Whereas heart-pain is what the wrath of God feels like, heart-joy is what the Gospel feels like.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Loving Our Neighbor –Part II*

The love by which we spontaneously live by faith in Christ is, by all appearances, identical to the love by which we must live without such faith. There is no measurable difference at all! No one can tell by observation that we are Christ-trusters. Not even we ourselves can be entirely sure that our love is based wholly on faith—at any rate that is beside the point. Only the Spirit knows. Because the Spirit of God is the Actor in our loving, love is not subject to scientific study or calculation or control but is necessarily and entirely free. Such love, which is wholly Christ's love for others, has no limits and takes no account of itself; if perchance it did, if we for even a moment stopped to evaluate it, or to judge ourselves by it, then it would cease to be based on faith in Christ. Love now seeks only the other. Hence there is no quid pro quo about love in the Spirit as there is without the Spirit. Everything without exception is a gift. In short, love now is anything and everything we get to do, now that we don't have to do anything (to please others or God). S.D.G.